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CONTENTS

Articles

| | |
|---|----|
| In Memorium: Carl Schuster | 2 |
| List of Publications by Carl Schuster | 3 |
| Symbolic Meanings in Oriental Rug Patterns: Part I | 5 |
| Symbolic Meanings in Oriental Rug Patterns: Part II | 22 |
| Symbolic Meanings in Oriental Rug Patterns: Part III <i>by Schuyler V.R. Cammann</i> | 42 |
| Ottoman Turkish Textiles <i>by Walter Denny</i> | 55 |
| Interlocking Warp and Weft in the Nasca 2 Style <i>by Ann P. Rowe</i> | 67 |

Book Reviews

| | |
|---|----|
| Girault: Textiles Boliviens, Région de Charazani <i>by Ann P. Rowe</i> | 79 |
| The Turcoman of Iran <i>by Anthony N. Landreau</i> | 80 |

| | |
|---------------|----|
| Briefly Noted | 81 |
|---------------|----|

| | |
|-----------------------------|----|
| Board of Trustees and Staff | 82 |
|-----------------------------|----|

SYMBOLIC MEANINGS IN ORIENTAL RUG PATTERNS: Part III

Schuyler V.R. Cammann

Persian Five-Medallion Rugs

The world-famous Persian "medallion rugs" of the 16th and early 17th centuries generally share a basic field pattern which is rich in symbolism, quite apart from all the minor elements such as flowers and animals, or even human huntsmen, which fill the background. Their full meaning has eluded modern Western scholars, because the latter have persisted in viewing these patterns as though they were Occidental designs, and, by describing them as such, they have misinterpreted them.

A rather typical description of a famous Safavid medallion carpet states, "The field has at its center a large quatrefoil medallion with trefoils at the points. . . . Each corner of the field contains one quarter of the center quatrefoil medallion with its accompanying quatrefoil and cartouche parts. The design of the quarters corresponds to that of the medallion."¹ Then, having disposed of the "less essential" elements, the writer goes on to give a long description of minor details in the background of the field, which in symbolic terms were far less significant.

The main fault here is that the cataloguer was assuming a limited composition, a self-contained pattern in Western style, neatly adjusted to fill the surface enclosed within the border. However, as we have noted in Part I, the field pattern on most Persian rugs and carpets was a representation of Infinity, in token of which it runs out under the border; and close observation reveals that this is also true of these five-medallion rugs, including the one partially described above. This convention is especially evident on the Ardebil rugs, on which the flowers at the outer edges of the background field are reduced to mere segments by the encroaching border-frame. In view of this, are the four corner designs on the Ardebil carpets (Fig. 19)—or those on the "hunting rugs" from Vienna and Milan (Fig. 20)—actually merely "quarter segments of the central one," as Western descriptions usually say? Or were they intended to represent whole medallions, somehow related to the central one?

Our answer is provided by the incomplete filler designs in the background of these corner elements, cut off by the border as they continue on beneath it, and also by certain requirements of symbolism. From both viewpoints we know that the corner devices have to be considered as mere segments of entire medallions that are figuratively extending out under the border. We can be positive about this, because we are dealing here with a definite symbol-complex that demands the presence of five full medallions: in short, another quincunx.

After the development of the Sun-Gate idea and the quite general representation of it by the Sunbird—or by a reduced form of him in the shape of a ring with double-heads: that is, some version of the cloud-collar—the tendency for related symbols to interchange began to operate again; so some of the symbolism of the Metaphysical Sun got transferred back to the actual Sun, and vice versa. Thus, in time,

¹L. Simon, "Description of the Boston Carpet," *BMB*, 69, p. 82.

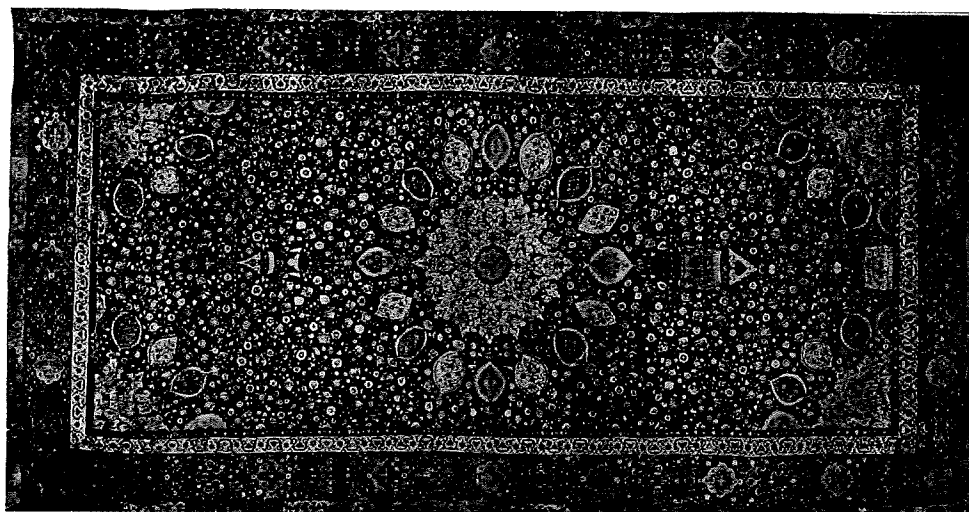


Fig. 19. The Ardebil carpet. Courtesy of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

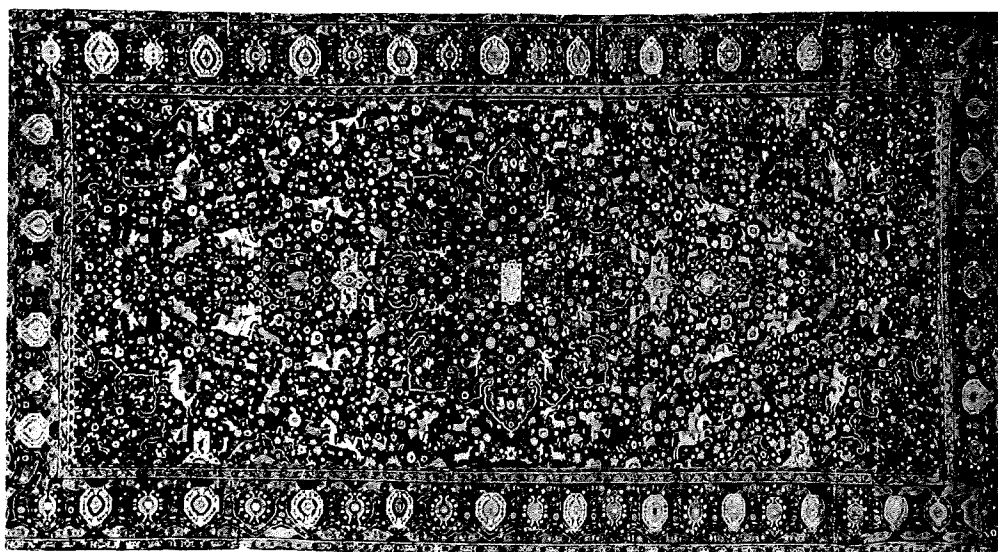


Fig. 20. The Milan hunting carpet. Courtesy of the Poldi Pezzoli Museum, Milan.

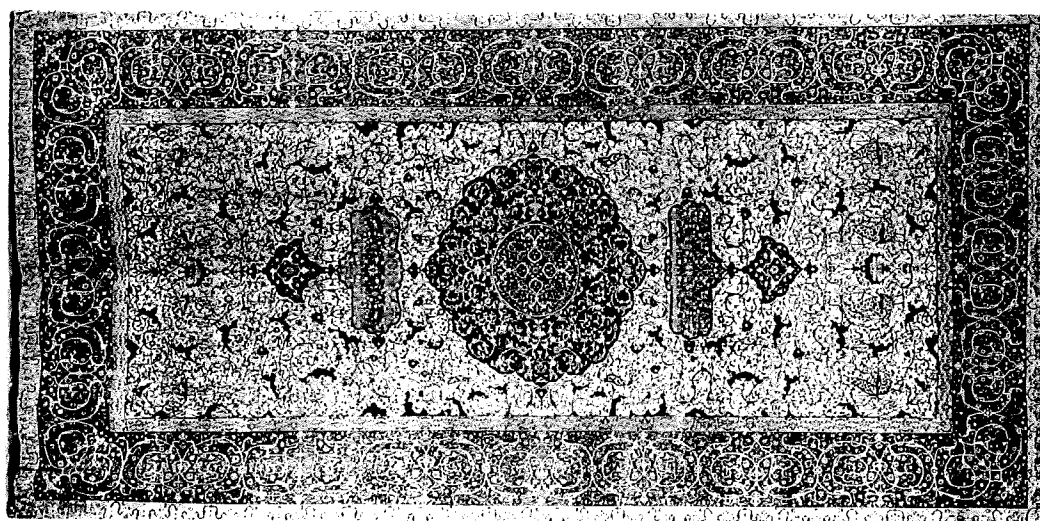


Fig. 21. The Anhalt carpet. Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

the outer Sun-doors, through which the Sun was believed to "enter" and "leave" at the solstices, also became lesser Sun-gates, considered as secondary entrances to Heaven. As such, they, too, came to be indicated by double-birds with a hole through the center of each, or else by cloud-collars, or other stylized representations of them. In line with this, Persian depictions of the Sky began to include five Sunbird symbols in a quincunx; the giant Sunbird at the center and the four lesser ones in the intermediate directions—at the ends of an X-shaped plan in which the Sunbird at the Sun-Gate proper, at the center of Heaven, occupies the middle.² Sometimes all five are shown the same size and shape; in other cases, the outer four may be abbreviated almost beyond recognition. A main point to emphasize is that, since there were only five Sun-Gates, the symbolism here calls for five Sunbirds or their equivalents, five only;³ although the background may be understood to continue on indefinitely beyond them, without observable limits.

This set of five Sunbirds served as the basic pattern on most of the finest Persian palace rugs made in the early Safavid period, and it provides a basic key to understanding them. On these palace rugs, we sometimes find a set of five elaborated cloud-collar medallions, as on the Ardebil carpets, but more often the medallions consist of a kind of double Sunbird. (See Fig. 20.) Instead of placing the characteristic double-beaked head at one end and a trefoil tail at the other, the head with its two arching beaks is repeated again at the bottom, as though the figure had been split in half horizontally, and the upper half reproduced "upside down" at the bottom. Of course, this was done to make the pattern symmetrical, so the rug could be viewed from either end; yet this doubling of the Sunbird is not confined to rug designs. Generally, the body has been reduced to a very narrow frame, and at each end there is an attenuation ending in a double-beaked vestigial head; while the "cartouche" between this and the body must represent a surviving remnant of the wings. In some cases, the medallion body also has "trefoil points" around its rim,⁴ or it may have prominent vestigial heads projecting from each side, in addition to the main heads at the ends.⁵

²Very rarely, the four outer Suns, or Sun-Gates, may be repeated twice in different ways. Thus, the Boston hunting carpet has four sun-faces in the main border, in addition to the four outer Sunbird-medallions; and we shall later be discussing an Egyptian rug which has stylized Sunbirds in addition to its four outer medallions; see ref. in note 24, below.

³The famous "Chelsea Carpet" in the Victoria & Albert Museum might seem to be an exception to this general rule. But it is not a real exception, because the eight medallions (six of them are truncated by the overlapping border) are not focal points. Another smaller, though much brighter medallion occupies the vital center, and these other medallions are merely ornamental features of a continuous pattern that flows away under the borders.

⁴As on the Milan hunting carpet; see *BMB*, 69, fig. 13, p. 46, and fig. 20, above.

⁵The Boston hunting carpet shows the connection between the five medallions and the cloud collar form with especial clarity, since the "body" on each of its Sunbird medallions has prominent vestigial double heads on each side, in addition to the main heads at the ends. This is shown in *ibid.*,

On carpets, and on the related bookcovers, the corner devices generally repeat the shape of the central one, though their colors may alter and their filling ornaments may differ.⁶ Sometimes, however, the corner figures follow the Sunbird symbolism more explicitly than the center medallion does, as on the Stockholm hunting carpet.⁷ On the other hand, they may be simplified to the extent that they lose even the double-heads.⁸ However, even extreme simplification does not affect their symbolic function. On dome-shaped tents and on helmets which showed the four outer reserves in the immediate directions below a central cloud-collar, these symbolic locations were often reduced to mere ovals, while still retaining their meaning.⁹

Since Asian tradition placed the Sun-Gate and the four auxiliary gates in Heaven, to correspond to the Axial Mountain and the four auxiliary supports on the Earth below, any pattern that contains these five gates must have been intended to represent Heaven as the World beyond the Sky. And this symbolism is reinforced when the background color is blue or golden yellow—traditional colors for the Sky and Paradise.¹⁰ How, then, can we account for flowers and animals in the background of such rugs? These were placed there as proper occupants of the Garden of Eden, which the Muslims believed to be situated on one of the layers of Heaven.

fig. 2, p. 36, though the photograph is very unclear.

For a much later survival of the cloud-collar medallions, see Dilley, pl. XXVII, upper left.

⁶See Erdmann, figs. 67, 69, 91 and 92. For Persian and Turkish bookcovers with five-part patterns similar to those on these carpets, see F. Sarre, *Islamic Bookbinding* (the English translation of his *Islamische Bucheinbände*), London, 1923, especially fig. 3, and pls. 7, 11, 13 and 17; and the *Survey of Persian Art*, Vol. VI, pls. 958 and 964.

⁷See the *BMB*, 69, p. 52.

⁸See Erdmann, figs. 67, 69, 91 and 92.

⁹The Turkish helmet cited in Part II, note 27, shown in *Art Treasures of Turkey*, no. 233, has these four outer reserves with vestigial heads at top and bottom, survivals of the same type that is found as a central medallion on the Persian carpets and on Persian and Turkish book covers from the same period, the 16th century A.D. Celal Esad Arseven, in *Les Arts Decoratifs Turcs*, Istanbul, n.d., describing the device as used on book-covers, says that this particular symbol is called "*şense (soleil)*," which indicates that it is still known as the Sun, even though the full associations have been forgotten. The author applied this term only to the central motif, although discussing the five-part patterns, apparently not realizing that the four incomplete medallions in the corners of the book-covers were actually of the same nature as the center one, and—since the idea of five Sun-gates had been forgotten—it would have seemed odd to him to speak of more than one Sun.

Just as the central spike on a mosque dome might have little ornamental balls between the three principal ones (as cited in Part II, note 25), a helmet would sometimes have rosettes between each pair of the four reserves; but these were included to break up the surface, and apparently had nothing to do with the symbolism. This is illustrated on another Turkish helmet, *Art Treasures of Turkey*, no. 232. As mentioned above, the same four reserves often decorated domed tents. See Grube, pl. 80, p. 127, where one of the four can be seen on the red tent at left center. (Note that this reserve still retains an obvious Sunbird shape.)

¹⁰In general, symbolic colors were more important in China than they were in Central and Western Asia. Hawley, in *Oriental Rugs*, p. 72, attempted to explain Chinese color symbolism; but, as usual, he was subjective and confused, and misinforming. The Chinese had symbolic colors for the Five Directions, and conventional colors for the Sun, the

Could a lion be attacking a horned animal in Paradise? Yes. In the Old Persian tradition even the Garden of Eden was not a "Peaceable Kingdom;" there, too, things operate according to the laws of Nature. It is natural for lions and other predatory animals to prey upon others; so a lion attacking a bull is only acting true to his nature. At the same time, this traditional symbol expressing solar ascendancy over the moon contributed to the overall symbolism of celestial light (from the Metaphysical Sun).¹¹ What about the human hunters shown on the famous "hunting carpets" in Boston, Milan, Stockholm, and Vienna? Persian nobles were inveterate huntsmen. They believed it was natural for noblemen to hunt, and for kings of men to prove their prowess by slaying the king of beasts. For such persons, even life in Paradise would seem monotonously dull without opportunities for the chase. Furthermore, the hunters on the earliest of these rugs—the one in Stockholm—are all hunting lions, so it seems probable that they were intended as lion-slaying kings of old, even though shown in Safavid dress.¹²

The main border on some of these hunting carpets illustrates celestial banqueting, presumably a welcoming feast at the Sky-Door.¹³ But, even in these cases the guard-stripes generally carry a continuous vine, or the flowers that face alternately in and out, to maintain the usual symbolism of passing Time, and the angels doubtless double as symbols of Protection.¹⁴

The celestial symbolism is expressed far more clearly in the pattern on the two Ardebil carpets, to which we have repeatedly referred. (See Fig. 19.) These were woven during the reign of Shāh Tahmāsp for the tomb chambers of his

Moon, auspicious clouds, etc. They also had special Dynastic colors, such as "Ming red" and "Ch'ing (Manchu) blue;" but these applied to clothing, etc., not to rugs. Bright, clear yellow was reserved for the Emperor and Empress—or, by permitted exception, to high dignitaries of the Lama Buddhist church—while various other yellows were reserved for the highest princes, imperial concubines, etc. Red was the color for weddings and symbolized Happiness in general. Green was reserved for eunuchs, but could also be used for women; it was never an imperial color, as Hawley alleges. White was reserved for funerals.

¹¹For the connection of the lion with the Sun and light, see Part II, text and note 77. Another use of the lion and bull conflict at this particular time in history may have been a nationalistic one. The Safavids were waging a series of wars with the Ottoman Turks, whose symbol was the crescent (see Sir Thomas Arnold, "Symbolism in Islam," the *Burlington Magazine*, Vol. 53, 1928, pp. 155-56, regarding the Turks and the crescent), while the solar lion, then as now, was the symbol for Persia. So the Persian lion attacking a lunar animal with crescent horns, and defeating him, could reflect hopes of victory over the Turkish enemy. Again, we see that we are dealing with a multivalent symbol, so that no one meaning—especially not an astrological one—could possibly suffice to "explain" it.

¹²In general, the Safavid costume for nobles and courtiers was a survival from Timurid traditions, inherited ultimately from the Mongol Il-Khans; but the headgear of this period was uniquely distinctive. A long, broad turban was tied around a cap that had a tall stick-like projection at the top. This feature in itself is useful for dating Persian pictures with human figures, unless they are modern archaistic paintings.

¹³See Part II, note 48, regarding the figures in the borders.

¹⁴See Part II, note 81, regarding the two sets of Sun symbols on the Boston hunting carpet.

father Shāh Ismael, founder of the Safavid Dynasty, and their ancestor Sheikh Sāfi ed-Dīn (d. 1334), at the famous Ardebil Shrine in Northwest Iran. Both of the deceased were Sūfīs, and both have been regarded by their followers—by most Persians, in fact—as Sūfī saints; so we could certainly expect to find some mystic symbolism on these carpets. One of them belongs to the Victoria and Albert Museum, in London; the other, after being greatly damaged and much repaired, now hangs in the Los Angeles County Museum.¹⁵

The patterns on these were once identical. Each contained a golden central medallion in the form of a huge sixteen-pronged cloud-collar, decorated with a four-part design lightly outlined in stylized clouds and leaf-forms, and in the middle of its hollow center is a tiny eight-petaled flower. The great golden cloud-collar, which must represent the Metaphysical Sun, appears to be in violent explosion, hurling bombs of light into a field of dark blue, symbolic color of the Sky.

This field is covered with vines bearing flowers, some of which are cut in half by the cloud-figured border, edged by guard-stripes with alternating motifs, that must symbolize the Sky-Door. These small flowers dissolve the background so completely that our attention is quickly drawn back to the more substantial central medallion—not that that is very solid either. Then we notice how its outgoing arrow-head points of light intermesh with smaller incoming trefoils, re-entering from the field; reciprocal action again. So, once more, we have a symbolic Return to the Source of Light, in response to the outward-streaming light.

The corners of the field contain what at first glance seem to be smaller reflections of the central medallion, also emitting light, though they do slightly differ. Obviously these represent the four lesser Sun-gates. Our full view of them is cut off by the bordering frame of the Sky-Door. The pattern within this must depict a glimpse of Heaven from outside its outer gate, as it would first be seen by the ascending souls of the two Sūfī saints buried at Ardebil, when, after the Last Judgement, they make their way upward to the realm beyond the Sky.

The flowers in the background, quite naturalistically rendered with incredible detail, probably stand for the stars, poetically described by Persian poets as "the ornaments of Heaven;" just as the two lamps that hang from the center—one larger and brighter than the other—must represent the natural Sun and the Moon, the two "lamps of Heaven" (*cheragh-e sipihr*). Note that both of these are much dimmer than the Divine Light that flares out between them.¹⁶

¹⁵Erdmann, in *700 Years of Oriental Carpets*, pp. 29-32, gives the story of these two carpets, in more detail than I have been able to find elsewhere, in addition to illustrating the one in Los Angeles (Fig. 19), which has rarely been pictured, because it was so badly cut up to obtain pieces with which to repair the first one, now in London.

¹⁶A passage in the Koran asks, "See ye not how Allah has created seven heavens in harmony and hath made the Moon a light therein, and made the Sun a lamp?" Koran, 71:15. For see Pickthall, *Glorious Koran*, p. 408.

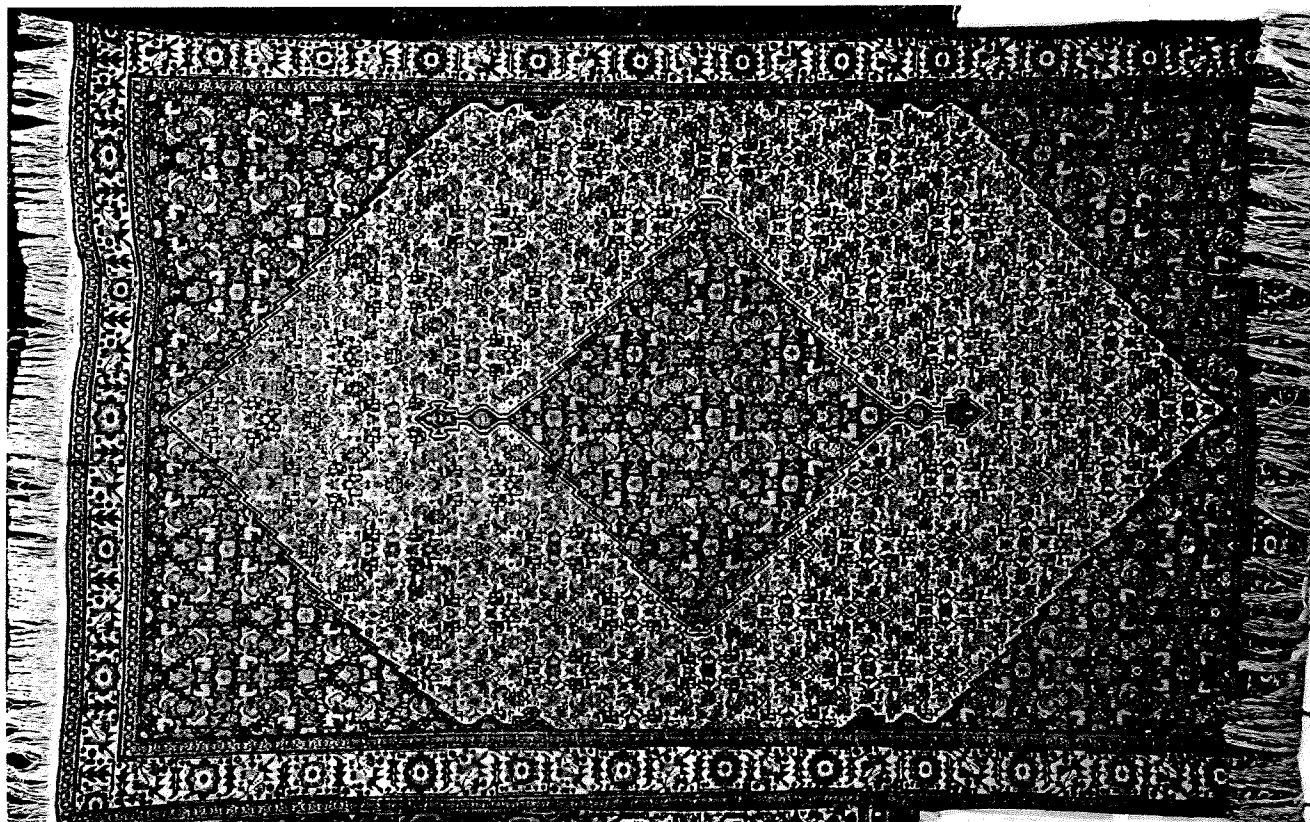


Fig. 22. A Sehna rug. Courtesy of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

A glimpse of the deeper interior of Heaven is offered by the pattern on the famous Anhalt carpet in the Metropolitan Museum, (shown in Fig. 21).¹⁷ Its overall design at first might seem simpler, because, since it represents a celestial region far beyond the four outer gates, it shows only a single Sunbird-medallion at the center; but actually it is far more complex than the Ardebīl pattern. Here, the double Sunbird is so attenuated that one barely sees the connections between the central "body," the rudimentary wings ("cartouche") and the two-beaked head. The four-part grill-work in the open center seems incredibly delicate, and behind it one can imagine—as the Persians must have done—the very Throne of God, in the topmost layer of Heaven. The yellow field pattern itself represents the golden light of Paradise in the realm of Endless Day. Since this would be too bright for human eyes to gaze upon directly, it is presented somewhat obscurely, as though seen through a curtain composed of an infinitely-extending arabesque of vines and leaves that flows out under the border. The presence of the four outer Sun-gates hidden behind the Sky-Door is symbolized by four pairs of Sunbirds, many-hued birds of Paradise, like nothing to be seen on Earth;¹⁸

¹⁷An enlarged detail of the Anhalt Carpet is shown in Erdmann, fig. 66.

¹⁸Since the traditional Sunbird was a double bird—perhaps evolved from a fusion of two single ones—it can also be represented by a pair of birds; hence the four pairs here may possibly stand for four individual Sunbirds. Note that each has the checkered body, with small squares of many colors, that Carl Schuster pointed out as one of the traditional ways for designating the Sunbird. See Part II, note 89.

and against all this are strewn filmy cloud-bands, as though to emphasize the vast stretches of sky between the viewer and this vision of Eternity.

The main border on this rug depicts what seem to be large stylized Sunbirds, drawn in the same delicate line-work so as to seem insubstantial, and facing alternately in and out. The inner guard-stripe consists of much tinier stylized Sunbirds, like extremely abbreviated renderings of the ones that are miscalled "turtles" in the much later Herātī border patterns;¹⁹ while the outer guard-stripe shows rhythmically alternating cloud-wisps. All of this is very appropriate decoration for a symbolic Sky-Door.

As we contemplate this great carpet, we can better understand the intended meaning of the dissolving patterns in the overall designs inside Persian mosque-domes, or the fields of certain more abstract Persian rugs—such as the golden Sarabands or Sehnas—which also represented Paradise as glimpsed through the Sky-Door. It is difficult to represent the Spiritual realm in any material way; but the Safavid Persians believed that Spirit is the opposite of Matter—as was stressed in the teachings of the Zoroastrian

¹⁹See Part I, note 76. A recent book on rugs is full of its writer's personal misconceptions. Among these was a passage attempting to explain why turtles could be found in these carpet borders; obviously he took the term very literally. See A. T. Gregorian, *Oriental Rugs and the Stories They Tell*, Boston, 1967, p. 90. Once this kind of false "rug lore" becomes established in people's minds, it is difficult to root out. But such misinformation must be erased if the study of rug patterns is to be put on a firm factual basis.

and the Manichaean religions, so many centuries before the coming of Islam—so, by dissolving and negating Matter, they felt they could achieve its opposite, and thereby achieve at least an impression of the Land of the Spirit, which is Heaven. On the Anhalt carpet they certainly succeeded.

While it has been convenient—and perhaps more comprehensible—to speak of the Sunbird medallions as being double-headed at top and bottom, in actual use these Persian carpets were spread laterally, extending out on either side of the ruler's cushion or throne, so the heads would have appeared at each side. We are inclined to forget this fact because our museums usually hang them vertically to conserve space, and because the shape of a book page makes it easier to illustrate them in this same way. But, since they were intended to be seen "crossways," we should make an effort to view them in that way for a better understanding of their original appearance. (This does not apply to Turkish rugs, nor to those that were woven on order for Europeans who wanted to use them in the other direction.)

The long, narrow shape of most of the Persian carpets that we have been reviewing indicates that they were of the type called *qālī* intended to be laid at the back of a reception-room. In front of this was generally a larger, squarish rug (*miyān farsh*), at each side of which were two, long narrow "runners," called *kenāre*. From the point of view of symbols, the only really significant one was the *qālī*, on which would sit the Ruler, a prince, a khan, or simply the head of the family, or a host. Only this one would be apt to carry Universe symbolism; the others could be quite plain or simply figured with an all-over pattern.

The East-West positioning of this main symbol-bearing carpet was significant in another way. The reader may have noticed on the "Portuguese carpets" and on some of the hunting rugs, a tendency for the corner devices almost to touch or even to meet at the ends of the field. (On later rugs they often do meet.) This was not simply an over-expansion of the corner elements, to usurp a larger part of the pattern, nor was it physically compelled by the narrowness of the field. Again, we can find a likely explanation in local belief. The Arabs and the Persians traditionally thought in terms of the "two Easts" (NE and SE) and the "two Wests" (NW and SW). Each pair was closely associated, because of the fact that the Sun appears to be traveling from one of these points to the other between the solstices. Especially for Old Iranian Sun-worshippers, or for Magi interested in celestial phenomena, these "outer directions" with their seasonal associations took on special prominence. This idea even found its way into the Koran, which in one place refers to Allah as "Lord of the Two Easts and Lord of the Two Wests."²⁰

The lateral extension of the Old Asian Universe-plan on Persian rugs inevitably produced distortions: not only be-

cause the "square Earth" had to be stretched into an oblong, but also because the border which represented the ring of the Sky-Door had to have its circular shape crushed into a rectangle. Similarly, in China, the round plan of the Universe, as it had been shown on the bronze mirrors, had to be reduced to a square on mats or cushions, or pulled out into an oblong for over-saddle rugs²¹ and larger carpets—unless it was simply reduced to a central medallion on them. Of course these were more convenient shapes for the intended purposes; but, more fundamentally, this was done because warp and weft threads, crossing at right angles, naturally produce a rectangular foundation. Therefore, most Asian rugs and mats were not woven on the loom in circular form until the 20th century, when Chinese weavers in Peking and Tientsin began to do so, to create novelties for the Western market.²² (The principal exceptions were some rugs from Egypt, that became popular in Europe as covers for round tables.²³)

Egyptian Carpets

Aside from the small Lama Buddhist prayer-mats of the Mongols and Tibetans, practically the only rug patterns that managed to maintain a square diagram of the Universe were those made by the Mameluks in Egypt. They were able to accomplish this either by weaving the whole rug in a squarer shape, or by adding outer panels on both sides of the principal plan. Surviving examples of Mameluk rugs, woven before the Turks conquered Egypt in 1517, often show quincunx patterns, having a large central medallion, sometimes equipped with cloud-collar points, to represent the Metaphysical Sun, along with four lesser medallions, showing the same, or similar, motifs somewhat reduced in size and complexity, in the corners. Perhaps the clearest example of this is a carpet in a European collection that has been attributed to the early 16th century.²⁴ A huge central medallion has at its very center the tiny eight-petaled star, surrounded by three concentric frames each of which bears eight cloud-collar points of a different sort. The outermost of these three frames, decorated in

²¹Westerners don't seem to realize that in North and Northwest China, Inner and Outer Mongolia, and Tibet, they used two kinds of saddle rugs: one type placed under the wooden saddle frame to help the animal (as shown in Dilley, pl. LVII), and a second lashed over this very hard saddle for the comfort of the rider. *Ibid.*, pl. LXI, center and right, shows typical examples of this second type as made and used in the early 20th century. (I write from experience, having done much riding in West China and in Inner Mongolia. See S. Cammann, *The Land of the Camel*, New York, 1951.)

²²See C. G. Ellis, "Chinese Rugs," *Textile Museum Journal*, Vol. 2, no. 3, 1968, p. 47, upper right, for a 20th century example.

²³See Erdmann, *700 Years of Oriental Carpets*, pp. 198-199. Fig. 252, on p. 198, shows a Mameluk example. See also May Beattie's remarks regarding Erdmann's statements on this topic, in *Oriental Arts*, N.S., Vol. 14, no. 3, 1968, p. 175.

²⁴See Schürmann, O.C., p. 27. See also K. Erdmann, "Neuere Untersuchungen zur Frager der Kairiner Teppiche," *Ars Orientalis*, Vol. 4, 1961, fig. 10, pl. 6, for the same pattern, and fig. 10, pl. 7, for an interesting variant, in which the stylized Sunbird symbols appear in adjoining panels at top and bottom of the carpet.

²⁰*Rabbu 'l-Mashriqaini wa-Rabbu 'l-Maghribaini*. Koran, 55:17; see Pickthall, *op. cit.*, p. 382.

gold and having eight Sunbird-projections, doubtless represented the open Sun-Gate and the actual Sun, simultaneously. This seems to be located at the apex of the Axis-Mountain, the latter having its outer limits outlined in blue. Six outer medallions in gold probably were intended to represent the rest of the "Seven Planets" (apart from the Sun itself, this symbolic group contained the Moon, Mars, Mercury, Jupiter, Venus, and Saturn), since these were so important in Islamic thought at that period, and still are in Egyptian and Maghrebī occult thinking.²⁵ To complete the basic quincunx, the corners of the field hold four eight-pointed medallions containing cloud-collar figures to represent the lesser Sun-gates; and, as though to emphasize their supposed function, outside of each we find the figure of a double-ended Sunbird, rendered in brighter gold. The field pattern on this rug is infinite, running out under the border. The main stripe on the latter shows a reciprocating design involving the double bird's-heads, while each of its guard-stripes portrays an endless vine in red, setting off blocks of background that face alternately inward and outward, thus stressing the defensive quality of the magic barrier.

Dr. Schürmann illustrates another late Mameluk rug which shows a similar World-Mountain set off by the four outer Sun-gates, these last being far less emphasized.²⁶ Especially interesting is the fact that the center of the central medallion shows the usual tiny flower framed in an arabesque formed by two equal-armed crosses arranged to cross each other. This device was an extremely frequent "decorative" motif in North Africa and Spain—and elsewhere in the Islamic World—sometimes elaborated by having three or four superimposed crosses.²⁷ Cross-forms, like compass-roses, were frequently used to indicate the Directions of Space, radiating from a common center. In certain other cases this motif seems definitely intended to indicate the Cosmic Center; and here there is no doubt of this, as the doubled cross at the center of this carpet occupies the symbolic Center of the Universe.

In short, although Egypt would seem quite far removed from the Inner Asian culture centers, the Mameluks—who had originally come there as Turkic warriors from Central Asia and the Caucasus region—had apparently still preserved enough of their ancestral tradition to be able to reproduce its basic elements in a recognizable form, though in a radically different style.

²⁵The books on magic and divination by the 12th century Maghrebi author al-Būnī—notably the *Shams al-Ma'ārif*, are full of references to magic relating to the Seven Planets, and these are still being published in Egypt. These, along with modern books of magic and divination involving the Seven Planets, are currently being published in Cairo and sold all across North Africa. (I have found a number of them in bookstores in Morocco, though the dealers always denied they had any until I convinced them that I was familiar with the subject.)

²⁶Schürmann, O.C., p. 28.

²⁷The Alhambra has many examples of this motif, notably in the Hall of the Ambassadors; see Haig, *Western Islamic Architecture*, fig. 66. It also appears on textiles, metal platters, carved doors, etc., all across the Muslim World. See *L'Art musulman*, pl. III, p. 15.

Some of the last examples, from just before the Turkish Conquest of 1517 or immediately after it, seem to have rather confusingly repetitive patterns, as though the tradition were beginning to cloud. But the Mameluk rugs with three large medallions in a row must not be considered as instances of confusion.²⁸ Three axial medallions, extending the length of the field would have been a traditionally acceptable way to depict the Universe, portraying it as consisting of the Three Worlds—Underworld, Earth, and Heaven—that were considered as being strung together on the Cosmic Axis. This is the idea that seems to be expressed by the three balls that are transfixed on the axis-spike rising from the dome on mosques in North Africa and elsewhere. Here, however, the vertical concept of the Three Worlds superimposed on an axis was trisected, so as to display all three in a horizontal spread. Therefore, a dignitary seated in the middle of such a rug could have considered himself as symbolically located on the center of the World at the very center of the Universe. In terms of Mediaeval Eastern magic this was a most powerful position, from which all things could be accomplished.

A further distinction of the patterns on the Mameluk rugs is that they often contained the coats-of-arms of great princes (emirs).²⁹ In this respect they differed from any other Islamic rug patterns, because no other Mediaeval Muslim nation employed a system of heraldry.³⁰ In this connection, it seems worth recalling that the Christian nations of Europe only acquired and developed their own brand of heraldry after seeing the identifying shield-patterns used by their Saracen opponents during the Crusades: here is one form of symbolism that came directly from the Islamic world to Europe. The Mediaeval Egyptian armorial shields were generally circular, containing a single symbol or pair of them; but they sometimes divided the field horizontally into three sections, with symbols in each. More rarely, they might show a heraldic device alone without the shield, like a European crest.³¹

The later Egyptian rugs, that were woven in Cairo after the Turkish Conquest, reflected Ottoman taste in their less angular patterns, but for a while they still preserved the quincunx plan. They presented this in the familiar Persian arrangement, with the form of the central medallion repeated in the four corners; although these corner figures were greatly reduced by the encroaching border, which, figuratively at least, fitted down over them.³² All five

²⁸The Textile Museum has a notable example; see C. G. Ellis, "Mysteries of the Misplaced Mameluks," *Textile Museum Journal*, Vol. 2, no. 2, 1967, fig. 2, p. 3. For others, see *ibid.*, fig. 21, p. 15, and Erdmann, "Neuere Untersuchungen," fig. 10, pl. 5.

²⁹For examples of Mameluk coats-of-arms, see *ibid.*, fig. 1, p. 2, and figs. 3-10, pp. 4 and 5.

³⁰For the most detailed study of the subject, see L. A. Mayer, *Saracenic Heraldry*, Oxford, 1933.

³¹C.f. Erdmann, fig. 46, which shows eight stem-cups around the central medallion; this type of cup was a common blazon for a cup-bearer (*sāqī*), actual or honorary.

³²See Erdmann, figs. 130-131 for later Egyptian rugs preserving the

medallions were set against an infinite field pattern that of course was also represented as continuing out indefinitely under the border. In time the quincunx idea was lost, and later examples show medallions scattered in regular order over an infinitely extending background. It seems unnecessary to emphasize again that the Egyptian carpets of any period—from Mediaeval Mameluk to later Cairene—offer unparalleled examples of the systematic breaking up of a patterned surface to symbolize the Dissolution of Matter.

Just as in the case of these later Egyptian rugs, when the central field of other Oriental rugs was greatly elongated, there was always a tendency to repeat the medallions in order to fill out the empty areas. Of course, this tendency was accelerated when the original symbolism was lost or forgotten, so they might be repeated endlessly and quite meaninglessly, as on some of the late Caucasian rugs. The point is that, even though the meaning may have been forgotten, the forms of the medallions and their contents often preserved the older types quite faithfully.

An extreme example of this degeneration is found on certain Turkoman rugs, which have what must once have been prominent central medallions now reduced to small repeated figures. Though these are simply called "flowers" (in Turkish or Persian, *gul*), their usual four-part symmetry, and their distant resemblance to the principal medallions on other rugs, suggests a probable descent from the central element of an old Universe pattern, such as we first saw on the backs of the Ancient Chinese bronze mirrors.³³ Because certain particular forms of *gul* were favored by certain tribes—Yomud, Saryk, Tekke, etc.—some Westerners think of them as tribal "crests;" but there does not seem to have been any trace of heraldic meanings here, simply a local preference for one or two old auspicious patterns among a number of traditional variations.

Patterns of Parks or Gardens

The frequency of patterns depicting flowers and brooks on Persian carpets has been ascribed by Western scholars to a natural appreciation for those relatively scarce sources of pleasure in the parched lands of the Middle East. That is not enough. Such fondness for flowers and water might explain why the Koran so frequently describes Paradise as a place with "gardens 'neath which waters flow;"³⁴ but once this description had become part of the sacred book, it gave Muslims everywhere both inspiration and sanction

for trying to represent Paradise in the form of a watery garden.

Also, the passage in this holy book which tells that Paradise contains four gardens, each with a fountain or spring,³⁵ has in turn inspired many Eastern gardens. As a direct result of this, the grounds of many Persian palaces, including that of Shāh 'Abbās in 17th century Isfahan, were laid out on a basic plan that included four gardens, and hence were given the descriptive name *Chahār Bāgh*.³⁶ Similarly,

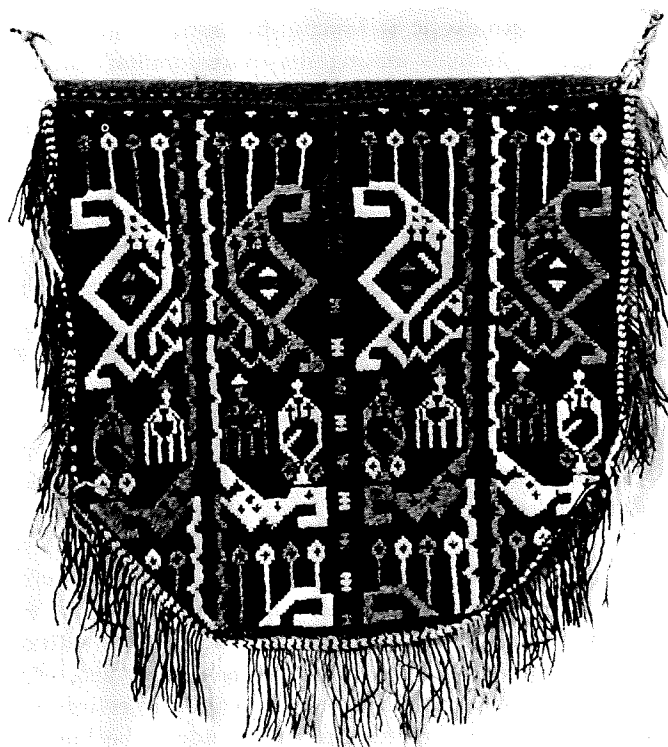


Fig. 23. Ersari saddle cover, showing the dragon and phoenix in conflict, stylized almost beyond recognition, from the writer's collection.

the tombs of the Mughal rulers in India were set out in great garden areas (also called *Chār Bāgh*), divided into four parts by water courses that ran under the mausoleum at the center.³⁷ These garden-tombs were admittedly deliberate attempts to represent Paradise, into which the souls

quincunx; and *ibid.*, figs. 132 and 133, for still later Egyptian rugs on which the medallions were used more freely.

³³A kind of Universe pattern incorporating a quincunx occurs on some of the older Salor weavings; see Schürmann, *C.A.R.*, pls. 6 and 7. Extremely conventionalized double-Sunbirds seem to be shown on the Ersari rug in *ibid.*, pl. 54, and the Afghan-Ersari example in *ibid.*, pl. 59, shows *guls* with types of highly conventionalized Sunbirds enclosed one within another. In short, these *guls* are far from being just "tribal marks" or "mere decoration," but in most cases the degeneration has proceeded so far that it may be impossible ever to decipher them completely.

³⁴See Part I, note 90.

³⁵See Part I, note 86.

³⁶The Islamic idea of four-part gardens, reflecting ideas of Paradise, goes back at least as far as the 9th century A.D. at Samarra, in Iraq; and, geographically, it travelled as far as Spain, where the Lion Court in the Alhambra, and the courtyard of the Cathedral in Sevilla (formerly the *ṣahn* of the great mosque which stood there), still illustrate it. See Hoag, *op. cit.*, pp. 18 and 27.

³⁷Volwachen, *op. cit.*, pp. 53 and 93, states that this was unquestionably a Persian innovation. It seems to have come from Persia along with most of the basic elements in Muslim Indian architecture. (Of course many lesser details were borrowed or evolved locally in India.)

of the dead would eventually find rest, as an earthly reflection of the Land of Delights to come. A similar idea must have underlain those patterns on the Persian rugs that show four garden plots in a horizontal spread with these four main divisions—and sometimes subdivisions, as well—set apart by flowing streams.³⁸ (See Fig. 23.) In later examples, the gardens on the rugs may extend far beyond four sections; and yet it is probable that even these did not stand for just any garden, but rather the Gardens of Paradise.

In Safavid Persia, gardens of flowers, gardens of blossoming trees, and scenes of gardens, parks or forests, containing birds or animals, with or without direct depiction of water, all served as popular subjects on carpets. Flower gardens with exotic or fanciful birds, and scenes showing imaginary animals among the more familiar ones, were usually intended to depict the Celestial Garden of Eden, in one of the Muslim Heavens.³⁹ Indeed, a Paradise attribution may be regarded as quite certain if the pattern contains the five Sunbird medallions that signal a view beyond the Sky-Door. However, carpets with decorative, rather than natural, flowers or trees, even though they lack medallions, may also have been intended to represent Paradise. This is most likely if the border seems to be accenting the Sky-Door theme by containing numerous cloud-bands.—On the other hand, some of the larger, squarish carpets with floral designs may have been intended simply for the *miyān farsh* or middle rug in the set of four; in which case, being less ceremonial, it need not have borne any highly developed Universe symbolism.

Although the patterns of “water gardens” generally show their flower plots and canals displayed horizontally, as though viewed directly from above, or as if reflecting Heaven directly from Earth below, many scenes with decorative flowers (with or without vases at intervals), or with blossoming trees, are depicted in vertical projection.⁴⁰ This suggests that the latter were either made to be hung on a wall, or were intended for the “middle rug,” which the ruler, chieftain, or head of a family would look down at as it was spread on front of the *qālī* carpet upon which he sat.

By contrast, the medallion carpets (*qālī*-type) which depicted gardens or forests with animals—that is, Eden, or hunting parks in Paradise—were usually bisymmetrically vertical. In other words, if one drew an imaginary line through the center of the rug at its narrowest width (figuratively, a North-South line), the pattern on either side (figuratively, the East and West ends) would generally present a vertical elevation stretching out and upward from that line. Thus, the person seated in the place of honor at the center could view the patterns extending out to his right and left. Sometimes, however, one finds the reverse, where

³⁸See Erdmann, *700 Years of Oriental Carpets*, figs. 73 and 74, pp. 68-69.

³⁹For the supposed structure of the Muslim Heavens, see Louis Gardet, “*dieu et la destinée de l'homme*,” *Etudes Musulmanes*, Vol. 9, 1967, p. 335.

⁴⁰While a vertical projection would seem to be the intent on the carpet in Erdmann, fig. 72, that is unquestionably the case in the more naturalistic pattern shown in *ibid.*, fig. 68. See also Bode and Kühnel, figs. 101-103, pp. 140-142, and figs. 107 and 108, pp. 147-48. (The last is the same that Erdmann showed in his fig. 68.)

the two halves seem to have been intended to be viewed from the outer ends.⁴¹ In rare cases, the vertical elevation may change directions several times. For example, an unusually long field might have more than one axial center, with the minor symbols around each arranged in four-part symmetry. The Metropolitan Museum has an excellent specimen of this.⁴²

In Mughal India, after the Iranian art of rug-weaving was carried south by Persian artisans in the 16th century, during the reigns of Humayun and his son Akbar the Great, scenes in simple vertical projection seem to have been quite frequently woven. Probably most of these were intended for wall carpets. There is little chance of mistaking these for Persian weavings, in spite of the similarity in technique, because of different color preferences, the inevitable introduction of purely Indian animals and plants, and sometimes Mughal architectural features as well.⁴³

For the Persian garden rugs, in particular, we are fortunate in having a written statement of the local views regarding their symbolism, contemporary with the early carpets that we have been discussing. This is contained in the Persian poem by an anonymous Sūfī, writing sometime around 1500, from which we have already seen a brief quotation in Part II.⁴⁴

In his “Ode to a Garden Carpet,” this poet says, “of the Garden of Paradise 'tis token and counterpart.” And, very significantly for our subject, he remarks, “The handsome wide border is the garden wall, protecting, preserving the Park within, for refuge and renewal: a magic space . . .”. Then, in characteristic Sūfī fashion, he refers to the Return to God, saying,

Man but briefly in earthly gardens dwells;
His pilgrim way he thenceforth must resume
Until at last, if faithful to his Lord,
The fadeless Garden of Paradise will open wide to him.

Finally, after analyzing the details in the carpet's view of Paradise, he sums up the meaning of the total pattern, in this way:

Here sense and reason in concord blend,
In harmony and proportion, in unity transcendent,
The mind of God revealing,
By our tangled errors so darkly hidden:
The goal of all desire,
The opener of all doors,
The answer to all questions,
The reason for all reasons.
From snares of self set free,
In august and tranquil beauty

⁴¹The field pattern on the Stockholm hunting carpet was designed primarily to be seen from the center; see *BMB*, 69, fig. 23, p. 52. Whereas the Milan hunting carpet seems to have been intended to be viewed from the sides or ends. See *ibid.*, fig. 13, p. 46, or fig. 20, above.

⁴²Illustrated in Bode and Kühnel, fig. 85, p. 120.

⁴³See Dilley, pls. XXXII, bottom, center and right, and XXXV, for Mughal pictorial rugs.

⁴⁴In Part II, note 82, see the reference for this poem and the following quotations from it.

The Beloved's Face at last we see,
And there attain our journey's end,
Our life's reward and final Destiny:
Refuge and fulfillment in His Infinity.

Lesser Symbols in the Backgrounds

The final elements for us to consider are the animals and birds, trees and flowers, that fill the royal parks, gardens of Paradise, and scenes of Eden on the great Persian palace carpets.

Among these, we quickly recognize familiar animals such as foxes and hares, or deer and gazelles. These latter are often under attack by lions, leopards or cheetahs, on the model of the lion-slaying-bull motif that Persia inherited from Old Assyria in an easily-traced descent. However, we also find with these a number of mythical creatures, many of which have defied identification by modern scholars of the Middle East; but they present few problems to a Sinologist, as they step right out of the Chinese art tradition. Apparently these were introduced to Iran during the Mongol domination. As we have previously noted, the Mongolian Il-Khans and their Timurid successors employed large numbers of Chinese artists and artisans, so it should not surprise us that the latter introduced into their productions—which may have included earlier designs for rugs—familiar subjects from their own tradition, to be copied by their local students and apprentices. Another line of transmission would have been the patterns on Chinese porcelains and textiles which were carried to Central and Western Asia in a steady stream from the 7th century of our era.⁴⁵

The most prominent as well as the most exotic of the Chinese creatures on the rugs were those described by Western writers as "phoenixes" and dragons. The so-called phoenixes were patterned after a fabulous bird in Chinese tradition known as the *fêng-huang*, the mythical ruler of all birds. As such, the Chinese pictured it as a composite of five most striking features from well-known birds in Nature: notably, they gave it the comb and wattles of a rooster and tail-plumes adopted from the Argus pheasant. In Ming Dynasty China, the male bird was given five serrated tail plumes, and the female two long curling ones—since Yang (male) numbers were odd, while Yin (female) numbers were even.⁴⁶ But these Ming Chinese conventions for differentiation were usually ignored in Persia—as they were in later China—since only the male bird was generally shown. He was considered as a single and unique creature, identified with the *Simurgh*, a monster-bird from Old Persian folklore, which was essentially another form of the Old Asiatic Sunbird. Like the Sun itself, he was reputed to be both life-

enhancing and possibly baleful, in contrast to the consistently benign and auspicious qualities of the *fêng-huang* in Old Chinese tradition.

Western writers are inclined to use the term "dragon" rather loosely, to cover a number of quite separate animals of ultimate Chinese origin that appear on the Safavid rugs and in the border designs that frame the miniature paintings from the same period. The most familiar of these was a true dragon-type, patterned after the traditional Old Chinese dragon, which was called *lung* or *mang* depending on the number of its claws. (The *lung*, or imperial dragon, had five claws on each foot, while the *mang* had only four; otherwise, they were exactly alike.) This beast—in either of its two forms—was also a composite, made by combining salient features from various other creatures: this time, nine of them.⁴⁷

As the Persian artists and craftsmen, including the designers of the rugs, lacked an itemized prescription for making a regular Chinese dragon, they did not give their own dragon all the details properly found on a *lung* or a *mang*, but its relation to these latter is always self-evident. The sinister head with one or two horns and over-long jaws, the snakelike body and sinuous tail, and the flames rising from shoulders and flanks to indicate its supernatural quality, all were items borrowed from the Chinese prototypes.

One distinctly un-Chinese element, however, was the way in which the dragon and phoenix—both benign and helpful to man in their original forms in China—were depicted in Persian Art as mortal enemies, opposed in savage combat.⁴⁸ This came about partly because the *Simurgh*-Phoenix in his role as Sunbird was a natural enemy of snakes and dragons; but it also reflected the ancient West Asian concept of a far-reaching bipolarity in Nature, which led to bitter conflict between Spiritual and Material—here symbolized by the Phoenix and the Dragon, respectively—not merely between Good and Evil in the familiar view. By contrast, the Chinese had envisioned two natural forces, called Yin and Yang, representing Spiritual and Material, Positive and Negative, Active and Passive, Male and Female, both working cooperatively together in mutual harmony, to maintain a balanced and peaceful Universe.⁴⁹ In terms of this, the *lung* dragon was a symbol of the Emperor and associated with the Yang; while the *fêng-huang* was associated with the Empress and, at least in this connection, would represent the Yin.

two types of phoenix used in the Ming. For a Persian example, see Grube, pl. 86, p. 60.

⁴⁷For a discussion of the types of Chinese dragons and their anatomy, see Cammann, *China's Dragon Robes*, pp. 77-81.

⁴⁸The motif of the Dragon-Phoenix Conflict began very early. See the example attributed to the early 15th century in Erdmann, fig. 15. For later examples, see the *Survey of Persian Art*, Vol. VI, pls. 1127, 1133, 1144-45, and 1163-64, etc. For a 20th century Turkoman example in which the dragon is no longer recognizable, see Cammann, "Ancient Symbols in Modern Afghanistan," fig. 13, pl. 5, and the detail, fig. 9, pl. 32.

⁴⁹The regular *yin-yang* symbol, so common elsewhere in Chinese Art, is

⁴⁵One important line of transmission of motifs was via the robes presented by the Chinese Emperor to foreign rulers, since these usually bore fanciful Chinese-style beasts, either in small reserves (mandarin squares) or as part of larger patterns. See S. Cammann, "Presentation of Dragon Robes by the Ming and Ch'ing Courts, for Diplomatic Purposes," *Sinologica*, Basel, Vol. 3, no. 3, 1953, pp. 193-202.

⁴⁶See S. Cammann, "Chinese Mandarin Squares," *University Museum Bulletin*, Vol. 17, no. 3, Philadelphia, 1953, fig. 1, following p. 44, for the



Fig. 24. Ch'i-lin on a Chinese mandarin square. Courtesy of University Museum, University of Pennsylvania.

The Chinese-style dragon and phoenix, together or alone, appeared on some of the earliest surviving mediaeval rugs from Anatolia, dating from the 14th century.⁵⁰ For these, a process of denaturalization had already set in, and it is often difficult to make out even their principal features; though they were seldom so stylized as to lose their form entirely, a development which actually happened on the much later Kazakh carpets from the Caucasus. On these last, the dragons are often almost totally unrecognizable, unless one has the good fortune to come upon a series of examples in which the deterioration of form can be progressively traced from one to another.⁵¹

Two other mythical Chinese animals that made their appearance on the Safavid rugs, and which have also been called "dragons" by indiscriminating Western writers, were the *ch'i-lin* and the *hsieh-chai*. The former (sometimes mis-called "kylin" by Occidentals) was a strange composite beast, with the head of a dragon, a body like a stag's though

composed of two interlocking, comma-shapes, in contrasting colors. This rarely appears on rugs; but Dilley illustrates three examples: pl. LVII, center, pl. LVIII, and pl. LXI, bottom. What might possibly be a Persian attempt to illustrate the same idea is found on a splendid Persian carpet on loan to the Metropolitan Museum, which is supposed to have been taken from the Turkish camp after the siege of Vienna was broken in 1683. See Grube, *The World of Islam*, fig. 88, p. 148, and note the two intertwined dragons of contrasting colors at the center of the central medallion.

⁵⁰See the first reference in note 48. Although this rug is usually attributed to Anatolia, some scholars see it as a product of the Caucasus. See Ettinghausen, "New Light on Early Animal Carpets," pp. 104-105, for a discussion of the arguments regarding this type.

⁵¹We have already discussed the Kazakh dragon rugs, but another inter-

covered with large scales, slender legs with delicate cloven hoofs,⁵² and a prominent bushy tail. In China, they were generally rendered in blue, and had wisps of flame rising from their shoulders and flanks as the dragons did. (See Fig. 24.) Even specialists on China sometimes call them "Chinese unicorns," although the Ming and Ch'ing varieties always bore a pair of horns. However, the Persians often showed them with a single crooked horn or antler, such as one finds on their dragons; but neither this form of horn nor the other details of their appearance bear any resemblance to those of the traditional unicorn of European art and folklore. The *ch'i-lin* appeared on the robes or badges of rank worn by Chinese nobles or high-ranking military officers,⁵³ but they also were pictured on other textiles, porcelains, and other art objects.⁵⁴

In contrast to the partially stag-like *ch'i-lin*, the *hsieh-chai* belonged to the lion family.⁵⁵ The Chinese generally represented it as a white lion with a single horn rising from its mane, and it, too, gave forth flame-wisps marking it as a supernatural beast. In China, it was worn as a badge of rank on the robes of imperial censors, judges, and officials in charge of law courts, because tradition claimed that it would gore the wicked but spare the innocent.⁵⁶ In Chinese mythology and folklore, there was absolutely no reason for any animosity between this and the *ch'i-lin*, and both were equally auspicious creatures.⁵⁷ However, in Iran, the old opposition between felines and horned animals once more came into play, and on carpets or in paintings one may find the leonine *hsieh-chai* attacking a *ch'i-lin*, or either one of these being set upon by a malevolent dragon, whose nature it was to prey on other beasts.

Still another Chinese beast occasionally appears on Persian rugs or paintings. This was another horned lion-form, called a *pai-tsé*. Though this, too, had a whitish body, it

esting set of over-stylized dragons appears on the "Sileh" flat-weaves from the Caucasus. See Dimand, *Peasant and Nomad Rugs*, p. 29 (disregarding the caption).

⁵²If museum curators would take the trouble to look at the feet of the fanciful animals borrowed from China, or inspired by Chinese prototypes, they could be more accurate in their labelling. A *ch'i-lin*, being a kind of dragon-stag, has hoofs, whereas the lion types that we shall be discussing have paws. This is a very clear and precise distinction, and it should not be difficult to see.

⁵³See "Chinese Mandarin Squares," fig. 22, for a typical *ch'i-lin*.

⁵⁴The *ch'i-lin* reached Turkey as a motif on Chinese blue-and-white porcelains (now preserved in the Topkapı Sarayı) and was reproduced on some Ottoman tiles in the 17th century. See K. Erdmann, "Neue Arbeiten zur Türkischen Keramik," *Ars Orientalis*, Vol. 5, 1963, pp. 210-211, and figs. 34, pl. 10, and 40 and 41, pl. 13.

⁵⁵See "Chinese Mandarin Squares," fig. 21, for a typical later *hsieh-chai*, and fig. 32 for a Ming example: the type that might have been carried to Persia.

⁵⁶Since more mandarin squares were made showing this animal than any other type, because there were more people entitled to wear it, cast-off examples were scattered abroad, and it thus became one of the best known of the Chinese animals among people of other lands. Some examples apparently got as far as Peru, and gave inspiration to weavers there. See S. Cammann, "Chinese Influence in Colonial Peruvian Tapestries," *The Textile Museum Journal*, Vol. 1, no. 3, 1964, figs. 1-5.

⁵⁷From the Chinese point of view, perhaps the most amusingly inappropriate Persian rendering of the *ch'i-lin* is shown in a painting illustrated

differed from the hsieh-chai in having a pair of prominent horns, an upright mane and flowing tail (both many-colored), and a partially scaly body.⁵⁸ Though these did not go back as far as the others in Old Chinese tradition, they also appeared on Ming Dynasty robes as badges of nobility at the period when the Safavids came to power,⁵⁹ and they also figured on porcelains that were exported to Western Asia from Ming China.⁶⁰

Chinese porcelains, textiles, and the badges of rank that we call "mandarin squares" also pictured birds, and we sometimes encounter Chinese pheasants—probably borrowed from these—on Persian rugs. In particular, we may find them in some of the more showy old Herātī borders, in place of the pairs of curving leaves that typically frame a flower.⁶¹

In the plant world as depicted on the Persian rugs, we can often find spectacular Chinese flowers such as the peony or chrysanthemum and the Sino-Indian lotus, or even unnatural combinations of these, taken directly from the patterns on Chinese blue-and-white porcelains from the Yüan Mongol and early Ming periods (14th to 16th centuries A.D.).⁶² But Iran itself had such a rich flora that it was not necessary to continue such borrowing. Before and after the reign of Shāh 'Abbās—during which the Chinese-style flowers were all the rage—the Persian artists and designers of rugs developed a floral repertoire of their own, taking natural plants familiar to them, or combining decorative elements from various flowers, as the Chinese had done.

Turkish rug-designers and weavers, too, sometimes used Chinese-style flowers or combinations of them; though the Anatolian weavers also developed a rich vocabulary of their own, using local plants such as the carnation or the humbler pink, the tulip, and the hyacinth. All of these appear, in various degrees of stylization, on the Anatolian rugs, as well as on the Ottoman court velvets and the brightly colored pottery from Iznik and Kutahya⁶³—all together offering especially fine examples of the interchange of design elements among the various art media within the common culture of Old Turkey.

The trees on Persian carpets are mostly local varieties such as the cypress, the plane tree, and the pomegranate bush. Pomegranate fruits are often shown in Chinese Art, including the rug designs, because their numerous seeds

make them obvious symbols of fertility or abundance in general; but the Chinese seldom used the bushes themselves as an art motif. By contrast, the latter are very common on the rugs from Yarkand and Khotan in Chinese Turkestan, in a kind of "Tree of Life" pattern.⁶⁴ However, the highly stylized, unnatural way in which these are represented has little connection with Chinese art, making it quite clear that the idea came from Persian weavers or their products, and not from the China side. Actually, the pomegranate fruit is not native to China; it was introduced there from Persia during the Middle Ages.

The trees that appear on Chinese rugs—especially on the relatively modern ones from Pao-t'ou in Inner Mongolia—such as the pine of longevity, the resplendent *wu-t'ung* associated with the phoenix in many patterns, and the tree-peony, do not seem to have carried over into Persian Art. The peach tree is an auspicious symbol on the rugs of both China and Persia; but the tree itself was another borrowing by China from Persia, and the idea of this tree as a symbol might well have developed independently in both areas. In both nations, its golden fruit caused it to be considered as a tree of Paradise; but to the Chinese the peach itself also meant "long life," and we have not found any evidence of such a belief in Persia. In Turkish art, when naturalistic trees are depicted to all, they usually are the cypress or the pomegranate; though shade trees also appear on the mazārlik prayer rugs.⁶⁵

Another conventional Chinese symbol often depicted on exported porcelains and textiles, to reappear on Western Asian rugs, was a stylized form for representing clouds (*yün-ts'ai*); though the Chinese also used it to designate sea-foam or mists upon the waters, and they used a very similar shape to depict a kind of sacred fungus called *ling-chih*, a traditional East Asian symbol of longevity. In its most familiar form, as an attenuated cloud streamer often connecting smaller Chinese cloud-forms, this symbol was frequently used on Persian and Turkish carpets.⁶⁶ It appears especially on the borders, where it helps to reinforce the Sky-Door symbolism. This motif seems to have proved especially confusing to Western writers, some of whom have imagined that a cloud-wisp folded back on itself must represent a scarf. Even those who were able to

could be compared with the far more stylized flowers on the rugs.

⁶⁴See Schürmann, *C.A.R.*, pl. 88, for typical examples of the pomegranate pattern from Chinese Turkestan. Dimand, *Peasant and Nomad Rugs*, pp. 72-73, illustrates another. The fruits on all these rugs show a peculiar local convention. A pomegranate fruit has a smooth skin, and its principal mark of identification in Asian art is the three small spikes—to indicate sepals—at the top; though the Chinese artists generally showed the skin cut away in one place to reveal the seeds, which naturally suggest fertility or abundance. In Chinese Turkestan, however, the weavers often showed the seeds on the outside, as though the husk had been removed, in order to underline the intended message.

⁶⁵The mazārlik prayer rugs were discussed in Part I; see Part I, note 87, for references.

⁶⁶See the attenuated cloud wisps in the border cartouches on the rug in Erdmann, fig. 58, and in the field, border, and outer guard stripe of the one in *ibid.*, pl. 5. They are more coarsely rendered in the field patterns of the later rugs, as shown in figs. 113 and 114.

in F. R. Martin, *The Miniature Paintings of Persia, India, and Turkey*, Vol. 2, London, 1912, p. 144, in which two of these proverbially gentle creatures are savagely biting each other.

⁵⁸See "Chinese Mandarin Squares," fig. 20, for a Ming pai-tsê.

⁵⁹For a Ming presentation robe with a pai-tsê motif, see *China's Dragon Robes*, pl. 2, right.

⁶⁰See John Pope, "Fourteenth-Century Blue-and-White," *Freer Gallery Occasional Papers*, Vol. 2, no. 1, Washington, 1952, pl. 7b, for an example of the way in which Chinese animals (here, a ch'i-lin) reached Western Asia.

⁶¹See Erdmann, figs. 68 and 69.

⁶²For evidence that this artistic hybridization of floral forms had already begun much earlier in China, see Jan Wirgin, *Sung Ceramic Designs*, 1970, text, pp. 177-78, and figs. 5-7, etc.

⁶³See D. T. Rice, *Islamic Art*, figs. 195, 197, 203, 204, 208, 209, for some of the varied ways in which the Turks used rather naturalistic flowers. These

identify it correctly have called it by a strange term *tchi*, which is totally incorrect. (Probably this is a misunderstanding or miswriting of the *chih* in *ling-chih*, which is quite irrelevant here.⁶⁷)

These animals and birds, flowers and trees, and stylized clouds, that appeared in the backgrounds of the field and border on Oriental rugs, were not especially important as individual symbols. Although some had minor meanings of their own, most just contributed to the total symbolism, like the fantastic animals that helped to identify a scene as Paradise. Certainly one should not expect to "understand the symbolism" on any individual rug by deciphering the meaning of any one of these alone, as some Western "rug-gists" have attempted to do. However, taken as a broad group, they still have a lot to teach us.

In the first place, the considerable amount of these secondary elements that can be traced back to East Asia helps one to realize the very great extent of Persian borrowings from China, which reached down to relatively minor details; thus it provides valuable further evidence of the vital *two-way* communication, down through the centuries, which has enriched both civilizations.⁶⁸ Even this much has shown us why it is impossible to make even a preliminary study of the Islamic language of symbols without understanding something of the symbol-language of Old China, far removed as that might seem—geographically, at least. However, the change undergone by such symbols as the dragon and the phoenix should caution us against impetuous efforts to read Chinese meanings into Persian symbols even when the latter are known to have been borrowed from China. Sometimes that works; but it is safer not to try it unless the general context or some associated symbols can provide either a suitable check or a definite clue to a possible change or extension of meaning. Even within China itself, some key-symbols changed their meaning when transferred to another area, or after the passage of time. Therefore, any analysis of the symbols borrowed from China by the Persians should not be attempted without a rather thorough knowledge of the basic symbolism in both areas.

Secondly, such age-old motives as the Ancient Assyrian lion slaying an ox, the Old Persian Simurgh (only half-revealed, as a Chinese phoenix, or an over-stylized Sun-bird), or the Tree of Life, all widely used in the Muslim World beyond Iran, give some evidence of the extent to which Islamic civilization in general borrowed art forms from earlier religions and previous cultures, eventually

⁶⁷ We even find this written *tschi*. It is an affectation to use a Chinese word here at all, when the term "cloud wisp" names and explains the motif quite adequately; but a wrong Chinese word, badly misspelled, is quite meaningless.

⁶⁸ Chinese Nationalism is not happy about past borrowings from other nations; and Western books on China have usually assumed, quite wrongly, that Chinese civilization developed in isolation. Actually, the Chinese borrowed a lot from Persian Art, both in designs and in techniques, especially during the 7th century A.D., when the invading Muslim armies forced the surviving members of the Sasanian royal family to seek refuge in China; but China also gave a lot to the Islamic World, as we have seen.

assimilating them into a homogeneous whole. In tracing only a bit of this development as it appeared on the rugs, we have begun to see and understand the process by which the Islamic arts came to bear such a strong resemblance to each other from nation to nation, and from one medium of expression to another within a single nation.

Lastly, and most importantly, we have seen that even these smaller, seemingly insignificant, details of design usually had some part to play in supporting or clarifying the overall symbolism. This was because behind all traditional Oriental rug design there has ever been a deep-felt—though perhaps not always conscious—regard for the interrelation between the different parts of the field pattern, and for the interconnection between the field and the border. Through this, the idea of Cosmic Unity was imparted to the traditional rug, and expressed in its pattern *as a whole*.

Since the Oriental rugs were products of a rich civilization, drawing as we have seen from earlier and more ancient cultures, no one symbol—nor any single complex of symbols—could possibly explain all Oriental rug patterns, or every detail on a single one. Yet we have seen that there were certain principal themes or motives, such as the World-Mountain, the Axis-Tree, the Sky-Door, or the Sun-bird, that were expressed in the designs of a great many rugs in the period from about 1500 to 1900, when old Asian traditions were still vital, alive in people's hearts and minds.

It seems likely that other key-symbols and salient ideas were also being expressed at the same time—either separately, or hidden behind these that we have been discussing—because the language of symbols is notorious for presenting meanings behind meanings, in many-layered constructions. Therefore, this present effort cannot be considered as any complete study of the symbolism on Oriental rugs. It is just an introduction, presenting a few easily verified examples and suggesting some possible lines for further investigation. It seems important, though, to stress the fact that extended studies of Asian symbols should only be undertaken by qualified persons. The language of symbols is a real language and it can only be properly translated by well-trained scholars who already have some knowledge of that language. Further progress in unlocking its secrets will doubtless reveal still deeper layers of religious and philosophical ideas that the Western world has overlooked, or perhaps forgotten, and then we shall have a still broader foundation for understanding and appreciating these Oriental rugs. As still more is discovered regarding the basic meanings behind their patterns, it should be even more apparent that it is not enough to cherish these rugs just as products of facile draughting-pens and deftly-moving fingers. They also deserve to be prized as creations of men's minds, reflecting some of their deepest thoughts and highest aspirations.